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SUBJECT: CARDINAL'S COMMENTS DRAW CHAVEZ'S IRE

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ABELARDO A. ARIAS FOR
REASONS 1.4 (d)

SUMMARY

[11.](#) (C) Retired Cardinal Rosalio Castillo Lara called the GOV a dictatorship and elections a farce in an interview published July 17, prompting President Hugo Chavez to call the prelate a bandit, coupster, devil, and a hypocrite on his Alo Presidente broadcast later that same day. Church and opposition leaders spoke out in support of Castillo Lara and condemned Chavez's attack on the Cardinal. Earlier in mid-July, Venezuela's Catholic leadership reasserted the Church's right to speak out on societal issues and strongly criticized the GOV's human rights record at the 84th assembly of the Venezuelan Episcopal Conference (CEV). The GOV dismissed both the CEV and its criticisms as being out of touch with reality. End Summary.

Cardinal Makes A Statement

[12.](#) (U) Cardinal Rosalio Castillo Lara, in a full-page interview July 17 in Caracas daily El Universal, said Venezuela was neither a democracy nor a state of law. Responding to President Hugo Chavez's claim that the Bolivarian Republic was "closer to the way of Christ" than any previous Venezuelan government, Castillo Lara declared that, "To the contrary, I believe this government is the most terrible government Venezuela has had since it came into existence as a republic." Castillo Lara posited that Venezuelans are living under a "dictatorship" and that they should act "according to article 350 of the constitution" and "reject this government." When questioned as to whether he viewed elections as an effective means of change, Castillo Lara responded that the Venezuelan electoral council (CNE) was not trustworthy and that therefore elections could only be "an organized farce of the state."

[13.](#) (U) In the interview, Castillo Lara clarified that, as a retired cardinal, he could not speak on behalf of the Catholic Church. However, he claimed that the rest of the Church leadership shared his perspective on President Chavez's attempts to eliminate opposition elements and concentrate power. He also stated that President Chavez's attempts to divide the Catholic leadership against itself by granting favors to some and not to others had failed, and that the Church stood united.

Chavez Takes The Bait

[14.](#) (U) President Chavez responded to Castillo Lara's remarks during his Alo Presidente broadcast July 17. He directed his response at newly arrived papal nuncio, Giacinto Berloco, and held Castillo Lara out as an example of why the GOV could not have good relations with the Church leadership. "It's not my fault," Chavez said, "Look at the history of what has occurred, and this is just one more example...it's an attack against the people by those who come representing god but have the devil inside." During his remarks, Chavez referred to Castillo Lara as the "bandit cardinal" and described him at various points in his monologue as being a devil, immoral, hypocrite and a go-between for the bandits of the governments of AD and COPEI. He also accused both Castillo Lara and the Catholic Church leadership of being "coupsters." Towards the end of the program, President Chavez touched again on Castillo Lara's remarks, and declared that if Christ was alive today, he would "grab a whip and find that bandit and would whip him across the face for betraying the Catholic faith."

Church, Opposition Condemn Chavez's 'Impropriety'

[15.](#) (U) Castillo Lara responded to Chavez's personal attack against him on a television broadcast July 17, stating that

"(Chavez's remarks) offend me as an honorable person", however "those types of insults do not constitute a response (to my criticisms)." The following day, Archbishop of Coro Robert Luckert and Venezuelan Episcopal Conference (CEV) Secretary General Bishop Jose Luis Azuaje publicly supported

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Castillo Lara and condemned President Chavez's attack against him. Luckert said Chavez had no right to call Castillo Lara a coupster, seeing as how he was one himself, and that Chavez's insults were "lacking in education, culture and tact." Azuaje affirmed Castillo Lara's right to express his views as a Venezuelan citizen and condemned both President Chavez as well as the government officials who "...applauded those insults, because that is not a good example for the Venezuelan people."

16. (U) Chavez opponents such as Eduardo Fernandez, President of COPEI, denounced "the inconsiderate and disrespectful language" with which the President referred to Castillo Lara and claimed that "The vast majority of Venezuelans are offended by this attack." Fernandez urged Chavez to "act like a President and not like a thug from the barrio always picking fights." Victor Bolivar, Vice-President of Accion Democratica, rejected the "rude and intolerant" manner in which President Chavez had defamed the Cardinal.

Other GOV Leaders Silent On Cardinal

17. (U) GOV leadership remained largely silent regarding President Chavez's attack on the Cardinal. Two deputies participated in a National Assembly debate over whether to form a special commission to investigate how President Chavez had violated the law with his statements. In opposing the motion, MVR deputy Iris Varela added to President Chavez's insults, calling Castillo Lara a "hired assassin" for the "coupster Catholic oligarchy." The Assembly rejected the motion.

Bishops Speak Out At Bi-Annual Conference

18. (U) Prior to the rift over the Cardinal's comments, Venezuelan Episcopal Conference (CEV) President Baltazar Porras opened the group's 84th session with remarks in which he denounced the GOV's efforts to silence the Church, and reasserted the Church's right to "...be heard and taken into account, without reprisals." The bishops ratified these sentiments in a communiqu  issued at the conference's close. The bishops reiterated Porras' stance that the "fight for freedom, justice, solidarity, reconciliation and peace is the irrenounceable duty of the Church", and warned that judicial partisanship could result in a situation of "legalized injustice." (The Cardinal, in his interview, asserted that Venezuela is already at the point of "legalized injustice.") Among other criticisms, the bishops' statement denounced security force abuses, the high crime rate, the prison crisis, and the existence of political prisoners. Regarding this last point, the bishops called on President Chavez to ratify the petition presented by the CEV at the beginning of the year and pardon those accused and detained for political reasons.

GOV Dismisses Bishops As 'Out of Touch'

19. (U) President Chavez dismissed the CEV's statement as proof that the Catholic leadership was "disconnected from reality" in statements to the press July 13. Adopting a semi-pious tone, he stated that he was "really sorry for (the bishops)" and hoped that god would pardon them because "they are only human and make mistakes." He portrayed the GOV as the victim of Church aggression, stating that the "Catholic hierarchy never tires of attacking (us)", and claimed that "there has never been a government in Venezuela closer to the way of Christ than the Bolivarian Republic." Vice-President Jose Vincente Rangel echoed President Chavez in statements made July 14, declaring that he too could not understand how there could be an anti-chavista Church, and claiming that "it is the Church that is picking fights with the government."

Comment

110. (C) After months of silence, the Venezuelan Catholic Church has once again proven its willingness to speak out against GOV abuses. The Church leadership's public defense of Cardinal Castillo Lara's statements to the press is a potent indication of the Church's renewed willingness to oppose the GOV publicly and directly. This approach, if it continues, could better position the Church as one of the

country's few remaining real counter-balances to the GOV's growing centralization of power. Although it is an approach which does not appear to coincide with the Vatican's recent decision to pursue a path of openness and dialogue with the GOV, it is one that is resounding among some Chavez opponents who conclude that given Castillo Lara's long Vatican history and reputed closeness to the new Pope, he can only be acting with the Holy See's blessing.
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